

Available online at www.sciencedirect.com**ScienceDirect**

Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 127 (2014) 464 – 468

Procedia
Social and Behavioral Sciences

PSIWORLD 2013

Social perception of aggression by high school students

Nedelusa Potirniche^a, Rodica Gabriela Enache^{b,*}^a "Decebal" High School of Constanța, Romania^b "Ovidius" University from Constanța, Romania

Abstract

Our research originated from the desire and need to study the phenomena of aggression and violence.. This study focuses on the teenager perception of aggression and violence as manifested in high school. The data used in this study was collected from 60 teenagers between 16 and 19 years old, from two high schools in Constanta County, Romania. The results indicate an insufficient level of information and education among teenagers regarding aggression and violence in high school. Any remedial program should address issues that lead to dysfunctional or broken families as a main cause of adolescent aggression and violence.

© 2014 Rodica Gabriela Enache. Published by Elsevier Ltd. Open access under [CC BY-NC-ND license](#).
Selection and peer-review under responsibility of Romanian Society of Applied Experimental Psychology.

Keywords: Aggression, violence, teenager

1. Problem Statement

Most of us recognize the fact that in contemporary society aggression has become a commonly observed phenomenon. However, human aggression is not new, as violent and aggressive behaviors have always constituted intrinsic parts of the human condition. As Paunescu (1994) indicated, humans possess a certain dose of potential aggressive behavior, necessary for self-defense and promotion of self-interest in the context of social pressures. Aggression can be analyzed from different angles, considering the various causes leading to it, and taking into account its various forms of manifestation. Bushman & Anderson (2002) defined aggression as an intentional behaviour with the intent of producing certain damage (to hurt, to destroy, or to cause material damage).

* * Corresponding author. Tel.: +4-0740244925

E-mail address: nedelusa@yahoo.com

Adolescence is a period of strong crisis caused by leaving childhood, which leads to physiological troubles, unbalances and oftentimes social exclusion. Oftentimes, the “adolescence crisis” is the result of multiple affective dysfunctions and behaviour deviations. All these can lead to violence in the form of aggression. What makes children act aggressively? Part of the answer may lie in the way they process social information- what features of the social environment they pay attention to, and how they interpret what they perceive. When highly aggressive children become emotionally aroused, memories of the past incidents may distort their current perceptions, so that they misinterpret others’ intentions toward them. This faulty processing can lead to aggressive behaviour (Crick & Dodge, 1994, 1996). Children who engage in hostile also called reactive) aggression tend to have a hostile bias, they frequently see other children as trying to hurt them, and they strike out angrily either in retaliation or in self- defense (Crick & Dodge, 1994, 1996; Waldman, 1996). Since people often to become hostile toward someone who acts aggressively toward them, a hostile bias may become a self-fulfilling prophecy, setting in a motion a cycle of aggression. Children who engage in instrumental or proactive aggression see the world quite differently. They view force or coercion as effective ways to get what they want, and they act deliberately not out of anger. In social learning terms, they are aggressive because they expect to be rewarded for it, and when they are rewarded, their belief in the effectiveness of aggression is reinforced (Crick & Dodge, 1996). Adults can help children curb hostile aggression by teaching them how to recognize when they are getting angry and how to control their anger. Instrumental aggression tend to stop if it is not rewarded. Above all, aggressive children need help in altering the way they process social information, so they do not interpret aggression as either justified or useful (Crick & Dodge, 1996).

Children who grow up observing aggressive models often imitate the behaviours they see. Different cultures model, reinforce and evoke differing tendencies toward violence. For example, crime rates are higher in countries marked by a great disparity between rich and poor show how cultures can also differ within a country. (Triandis, 1994; Nisbett, 1993).

Several factors can have a negative impact on the behavior of teenagers. The causes of aggression are complex, however two distinct categories can be identified: (i) psycho-individual factors springing from the depth of human individuality (e.g., mental perturbations, negative feelings, temperamental dispositions, intelligence level and emotional control) and, (ii) external factors generated by the socio-economic and educational background in which an individual is brought up (e.g., aggression within the family, severe parental discipline, exposure to the aggression of peers, exposure to violence through mass-media, video games or gambling, and extended exposure to violence in real life). Adolescent aggression oftentimes represents a benign problem, such problem vanishing with the maturing of the aggressive teenager into adulthood. The positive outcome of this process, in which the behaviour problems of the adolescence are overcome, significantly depends on the support that the aggressive teenager finds within his environment (i.e. family, friends, school, and community). Aggression and violence within the Romanian school environment are general phenomena. In a research involving 909 Romanian teaching institutions, violent behaviour was found in approximately 75% of the cases investigated according to the statements of school principals. When inquiries extended to school councils, aggressive and violent behaviour was reported in 97% of the cases investigated (Jigau et al. 2006).

2. Research plan

2.1. Purpose of Study

Aggressive behaviour in teaching institutions represents a detrimental factor that not only negatively impacts the successful completion of the educational process, but also has a negative impact on the society at large. This research activity was conducted between November 2012 - December 2012, and its objectives were: characterize the manner in which aggression is perceived by teenagers; identify aggressive behaviors which occur more frequently, and identify the causes of aggressive behavior.

2.2. Participants

The research pool was comprised of 60 students at two high schools in County Constanta.

The two highschools were Theoretical Highschool Decebal from the city of Constanta, and Tehnological Scholar Group Lazar Eldeanu from the city of Navodari. The participants in the study were classmates, and members of two groups with frequent aggressive manifestations. The students were between 16 and 19 years old at the time of the study ($M=17,1$, $SD=2,23$). 20% of them were from an urban environment, and 80% were from a rural environment. According to the data provided by the leadership of the units investigated, the socio-economic levels of the students in the study was distributed based on the income level as follows: 9 % low, 26 % low –medium, 50 % medium, 5% medium-high and 9% high levels of income. A graphical representation of the research pool is illustrated in Fig. 1.

2.3. Research Methods

Students filled out a questionnaire in a 40-min period during a counseling and orientation course. The goal of the questionnaire was to reach an understanding of the causes and the various forms of manifestation of aggression in high schools. Reaching this understanding is essential in order to devise future programs to prevent or reduce aggression and violence levels in high schools. As a first step in the study, each questioned student was asked to provide a definition of aggression, and to offer examples of aggressive behaviors in their high school. Several common aggressive behaviors were recorded in the answers to the questionnaire. The students identified specific situations in which they have been involved or noticed aggressive behaviors. They also estimated the frequency of each observed aggressive behavior, by grading them on a Lickert scale with five steps, 1" for the lowest frequency, and 5" for extrememly frequent aggressive events.

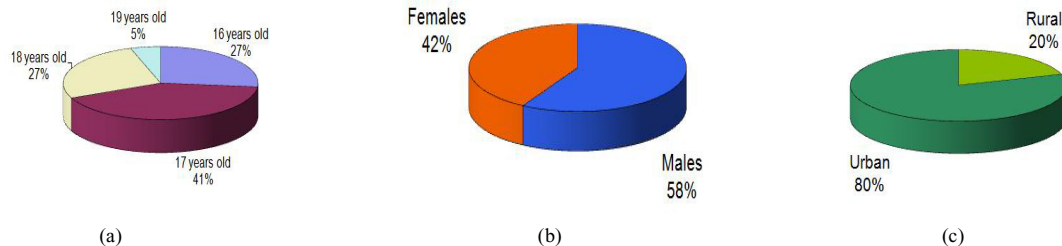


Fig. 1. Distribution of the students in the research pool by: (a) age, (b) gender, and (c) place of origin.

3. Findings

3.1. Risk factors of teenager aggression

Because our research investigated two separate student groups from two high schools with different specializations, the results from the two groups will be presented in parallel. The question referring to the risk factors for teenager aggression was answered differently by the students in the theoretical high school versus those in the technological high school. The students in the theoretical high school identified as the most important issue the problems within family, while other factors of risk were identified as: group of friends, aggression by others which triggers more aggressive acts, environment, and aggression and violence on TV. Fig. 2a shows the distribution of the answers by the students in the theoretical highschool. On the other hand, the students in the technological high school identified alcohol consumption as the most relevant risk factor. Other significant risk factors in their opinion were drugs, lack of money, verbal insults and group of friends. Fig. 2b shows the distributions of the answers given to this question by the students from the technological high school.

3.2. Common forms of aggression in high school

Next, students were asked if there is aggression in their highschool. 77% of the students questioned in the theoretical high school believed that aggression is present in their school, while 6% did not answer this question. In the technological high school, 78% of the questioned students believed that aggression is present in their school, while 8% did not provide an answer to this question. Regarding the most common form of aggression, 93% of the students in the theoretical high school believe that aggressive acts are present in their school in the form of insults, while 74% of the students in the technological high school affirmed that the most common forms of aggression in their school is by physical violence exerted by hitting another person or an object. A detailed breakup of the various forms of aggression in the two high schools is presented in Fig. 3.

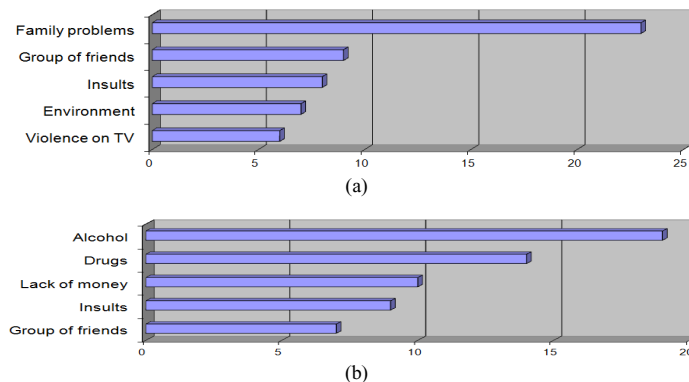


Fig. 2. Risk factors of aggression as identified by students from: (a) the theoretical high school, and (b) the technological high school.

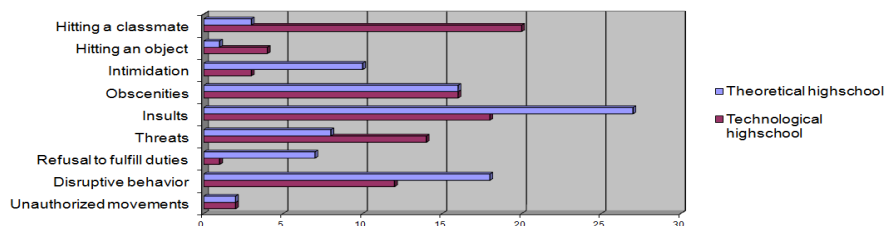


Fig. 3. Forms of aggression in highschool.

3.3. Measures to reduce aggression

Students were also questioned on the best measures needed to reduce or eliminate aggression. In this case, the answers were different as well, depending on the respondent's high school. Those in the theoretical high school recommended the best measures as: psychological counseling, assigning lower grades in the behavior course, and the introduction of educational courses on aggression. As a last measure, they recommend expelling aggressive students from school.

The students from the technological highschool recommended as the best measures to reduce aggression as: assigning lower grades in the behavior course, increase of out-of-school activities, and, as a last resort, expelling of problematic students from school.

A qualitative analysis of these answers is presented in Fig. 4.

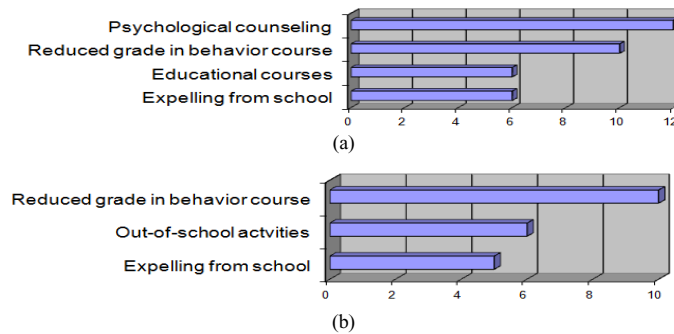


Fig. 4. Measures to reduce aggression and violence, as recommended by students in: (a) the theoretical high school, and (b) the technological high school.

4. Conclusions

This study found that the teenager perception of aggression depends on their background and school in which they are enrolled. The most important risk factors identified by the two groups from the theoretical and the technological high schools were identified as family problems and alcohol consumption, respectively. Other risk factors were also instrumental in generating aggression among teenagers. Both groups identified insults and the group of friends as risk factors in generating aggression and violence. The most common form of aggression was verbal violence, in the form of insults or obcentities. Respondents also revealed that physical violence toward peers or objects as a common form of aggression among teenagers. It is interesting to notice that disruptive behavior in the classroom was also identified by students as aggression by teenagers. The corrective measures to address the proliferation of teenagers violence included counseling and out-of-school programs, educational programs to understand aggression and violence. In extreme cases, students recommended expelling their aggressive or violent peers from school.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the students and teachers from the High Decebal, Constanta, and Tehnological High School Lazar Eldeanu, Navodari for their participation in this study.

References

- Anderson, C.A., & Bushman, B.J. (2002). Human aggression, *Annual Review of Psychology*, 53, 27-51.
- Crick, N.R., & Dodge K.A., (1994). A review and formulation of social information-processing mechanisms in children's social adjustment, *Psychological Bulletin*, 115, 74-101.
- Crick, N.R., & Dodge K.A., (1996). Social information-processing mechanisms in reactive and proactive aggression, *Child Development*, 67.
- Jigau, M., Liiceanu, A., & Preoteasa, L. (2006). *Violence in school*. Bucharest: UNICEF.
- Nisbett R. (1993). Violence and US regional culture, *American Psychologist*, 48.
- Paunescu, C. (1994). *Agressivity and human condition*. Bucharest: Tehnica.
- Triandis, H.C. (1994). *Culture and social behavior*. New York: Mc Graw Hill.
- Waldman I.D. (1996). Aggressive boys' hostile perceptual and response biases: The role of attention and impulsivity. *Child Development*, 67.